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# EDITORIAL GAMES WITH A SOCIETAL AGENDA, VALUES AND CULTURE

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Games are dynamic cultural worlds that shape, reflect, and transmit values, identities, and worldviews. They serve as bridges and barriers, capable of fostering or hindering inclusion and community. This dual nature renders games a significant cultural force, particularly for young people, who are both consumers and potential creators of games. The games we play, the messages they convey, and the communities they cultivate influence our ethical orientations, sense of belonging, and civic engagement within and beyond the gaming world itself (Costa et al., 2025).

This special issue stems from a growing recognition that games do much more than entertain: they can teach, cultivate, commemorate, and transform. A set of practice-based initiatives and research programmes - among them the EP-IC-WE effort to run Cultural Game Jams in GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, museums) contexts - illustrate how game jams can intentionally and meaningfully connect game-making with cultural values and heritage (Holfod et al., 2025). Game jams as discussed in this volume, can be organised at museums and historic sites with explicit aims of value-sensitive design and youth empowerment. In these formats participants co-create games in response to themes such as democracy, collective memory, or biodiversity; the objective is to foster imaginative, culturally meaningful experiences rather than merely to produce fun games.

The articles included in this special issue all demonstrate in different ways how game jams and game-making can embody and transmit social and cultural values and meaning. From analyses of commercial game titles to design interventions in game jams, contributors show how games serve

as vessels of culture, heritage, and values as well as sites for embodying and experimenting with inclusion, diversity, and care.

*Yakuza 0* is read as a richly ludoformed representation of Japan's late-1980s bubble economy that functions as a cultural heritage "time capsule" for later generations (Nahid-Ull-Islam, 2025). Other pieces investigate values-led processes: Finnish game cultural organisations foreground diversity, equity, and inclusion as central to their mission (Friman et al., 2025), and design research demonstrates how iterative, equity-centred cultural game jam practices cultivate youth agency and collective care (Holfod et al., 2025). Together the articles reveal that collaborative and co-creative game development can foster cultural learning, empower young participants, and strengthen local creative and cultural ecosystems.

Prior scholarship on game jams has emphasised creativity, rapid prototyping, and community formation, but has less often examined how game jams can be structured to foreground specific heritage- and value-oriented aims. The contributions in this issue respond to that gap by articulating concrete formats and evaluative lenses for heritage- and values-driven game jams (Holfod et al., 2025; de Assis et al., 2025). At the same time, institutional texts and public policy discourses shape the field: organisational commitments to DEI affect what kinds of participants are invited, what facilitation is offered, and what outcomes are valorised (Friman et al., 2025).

In *Cultural Heritage in Yakuza 0: Representing Japan's Bubble Economy*, Nahid-Ull-Islam examines how *Yakuza 0* (Ryu Ga

Gotoku Studio, 2015) stages tangible and intangible cultural heritage from Japan's bubble economy era. Employing the analytical framework developed by Balela and Mundy (2015), the author conducts extensive gameplay and textual analysis to identify material artefacts (cityscapes, in-game objects, price structures) and intangible practices (consumption, nightlife culture, social rituals) that index late-1980s Japan. The study argues that the game's ludoformed recreations of Kamurochō and Sotenbori, its mini-games (karaoke, discos, arcades), and its narrative focus on land speculation together perform a coherent cultural archive of the bubble era. The principal contribution is descriptive and interpretive: it demonstrates how a commercial AAA title can operate as a historically-inflected artefact that preserves and communicates cultural meaning to contemporary players.

In *"Cornerstones for Creativity and Success": Finnish Game Cultural Organisations' Public DEI Definitions and Practices*, Friman and colleagues present a reflexive content analysis of 18 public DEI documents from 11 Finnish game cultural organisations, including companies, associations, event organisers, and public actors. The authors map document types (codes of conduct, guides, DEI statements, strategies) and examine how organisations define DEI and operationalise values. Findings indicate that Finnish organisations broadly position DEI as integral to cultural sustainability and organisational success; they report active commitments to preventing harassment and building safer spaces but often lack concrete metrics and timelines for evaluation. The paper contributes an ecological view of game-sector value articulation: it shows how a diverse set of organisations together produce a shared cultural grammar around inclusion,

while also revealing gaps between rhetoric and measurable practice.

In *Gaming for Social Change: Sharmila and the Representation of Otherness*, Cátia Ferreira & Tamires Lietti examine *Sharmila*, employing thematic analysis informed by extended gameplay sessions and deductive coding. *Sharmila* is a serious game developed by the World Food Programme (WFP), which foregrounds food insecurity and the lived experiences of vulnerable populations. The game immerses players in conditions of hunger, displacement, and survival, facilitating a form of situated learning that connects experiential engagement with real-world contexts. As a case study, *Sharmila* enables critical examination of the representation of otherness and the construction of difference, raising questions about narrative framing, voice, and agency in serious games. This research situates *Sharmila* within broader debates on cultural representation and values.

In *Designing with Ambiguity: Iterating Equity in Game Jam Design*, Holfod and co-authors report on an iterative design-based research project (EPIC-WE) in which multiple Cultural Game Jam interventions were redesigned through successive cycles to foreground community, equity, and care. Drawing on inclusive, pluriversal, and transversal design lenses, the authors document practical adaptations - such as facilitated small groups, dedicated quiet spaces, scaffolding for diverse communication styles, and explicit values workshops - that shift the game jam's emphasis from product to process and from competition to collective and cultural meaning-making. The paper offers a reflexive practice framework with actionable questions and facilitation strategies

that other game jam organisers can adopt. Its contribution is both theoretical and practical: it reframes equity as an iterative relational practice embedded in game jam design, rather than as a static checklist.

In *Heroes, Helpers, and Villains: Representations of the Carnation Revolution through Cultural Game Jam Outputs*, de Assis and co-authors analysed nine student cultural game prototypes produced at an Óbidos Cultural Game Jam (within the EPIC-WE project) focused on Portugal's Carnation Revolution. Through mixed methods - participant questionnaires combined with qualitative analysis of game narratives and mechanics - the study classifies students' cultural games into narrative roles (Heroes, Helpers, Villains) and traces how educational level and framing affected representational choices. High-school teams tended toward heroic, straightforward narratives, whereas university teams produced more ambiguous or critical configurations, including role reversals that invited reflection on the nature of power and resistance. The article demonstrates that novice game-makers, when scaffolded through cultural game jam processes, can create games that meaningfully engage with historical themes and that narrative framing is central to pedagogical and ethical impact.

In *A qualitative content analysis of African video games developed by students*, Oluwarotimi & Rebecca, guided by the participatory culture framework, engaged students in collaborative game development processes centered on African themes. The students produced seventeen original video games, each reflecting diverse aspects of African culture. Through qualitative analysis, eight key cultural characteristics were identified

across these games: aesthetics, music and dance, mythological creatures, religion, race, play style, landscape, and language. This article seeks to contribute to the decolonisation of game studies by advocating for the meaningful representation of Africa's rich and diverse cultural heritage in video games developed within African contexts. By foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems and creative practices, video games can function as platforms for projecting, transmitting, and preserving African cultural identities, even amid the dominance of Western design paradigms.

Across the issue, three interlocking themes emerge: (1) the centrality of cultural context and GLAM collaboration and co-creation; (2) the empowering and emancipatory potential of youth participation; and (3) the operationalisation of heritage- and value-driven game-making at both institutional and event levels.

First, the contributions foreground the productive partnerships between cultural institutions, creative industries, education, research, and participants. Heritage game jam sites such as museums or historic towns provide thematic scaffolding and material resources for game-making, while game-makers translate those resources into interactive narratives and mechanics (Holfod et al., 2025; de Assis et al., 2025; Nahid-Ull-Islam, 2025). The Yakuza 0 case complements jam-based work by showing that cultural meaning is not only made in small events but also encoded at scale in commercial products that echo real urban topographies and social practices (Nahid-Ull-Islam, 2025). Second, youth participation is shown to be consequential. When game jams deliberately distribute agency - through facilitation, reflection,

and design tasks - young participants act as co-creators of cultural narratives rather than passive recipients; they can produce complex, critical re-readings of heritage (Holflod et al., 2025; de Assis et al., 2025). These practices align with an emphasis on empowerment via participation and co-creation. Third, values appear both as content (narratives about freedom, memory, justice) and as processual commitments (DEI policies, facilitation choices). Friman et al. show that organisations publicly commit to inclusion (Friman et al., 2025); Holflod et al. and de Assis et al. provide operational tools for embedding such commitments in game jam design and assessment (Holflod et al., 2025; de Assis et al., 2025). Taken together, the special issue also surfaces productive tensions. Several articles note a gap between stated values and measurable outcomes: organisations frequently articulate DEI aspirations without defined metrics (Friman et al., 2025). Game jam designers emphasise that equity is emergent and requires continual iteration rather than singular policy solutions (Holflod et al., 2025). Narrative work reveals that representation can both clarify and complicate historical understanding, calling for careful facilitation and contextualisation when heritage is translated into play (de Assis et al., 2025; Nahid-Ull-Islam, 2025). Oluwarotimi & Rebecca advocate the decolonisation of game studies in video games developed within African contexts, asking for sensitive game design that includes Africa's rich and diverse cultural heritage. In the same line, Ferreira & Tamires analyse *Sharmila* within broader debates on cultural representation, highlighting the role of games with societal aims in shaping perceptions of social justice and global inequality.

Game designers creating heritage content should attend to ludoform and narrative choices that preserve contextual authenticity while inviting heritage interpretation (Nahid-Ull-Islam, 2025; de Assis et al., 2025). For researchers, promising future directions include longitudinal evaluation of cultural game jam impact and outcomes (civic knowledge, cultural empathy, continued engagement), comparative studies of institutional DEI implementation across national contexts, and mixed-methods investigations that link game jam interventions with cultural learning or empowerment results (Friman et al., 2025; Holflod et al., 2025). For game jam practitioners - museum curators, educators, and industry partners - the findings offer concrete guidance. Host institutions should design game jam settings that privilege reflection and plural perspectives, provide facilitation scaffolds for diverse participation styles, and embed explicit heritage engagement, value statements, and assessment plans (Holflod et al., 2025; Friman et al., 2025).

Overall, the issue and its articles advance the proposition that games and game jams are legitimate cultural practices capable of transmitting values, fostering critical reflection, and co-creating heritage in meaningful and empowering ways. By aligning institutional commitments, reflective event design, and narrative attention, practitioners and scholars can help ensure that games function not only as entertainment but also as tools for cultural education, civic imagination, and social inclusion.

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